

GLOSSARY

SUPERFUND GLOSSARY OF TERMS

There are many terms and acronyms specific to the Superfund program that you may not recognize. This glossary defines both terms and acronyms to ensure that the information provided in this document is easy to understand for everyone.

Action Memorandum

A document authorizing and outlining the cleanup plan that will be followed as part of a short-term cleanup.

Acute Exposure

A single exposure to a hazardous material for a brief length of time.

Administrative Record

A compilation of documents supporting an administrative action; under Superfund, administrative actions often compel Potentially Responsible Parties (PRPs) to undertake or pay for hazardous waste site cleanups.

Advection

Transportation of contaminants by the flow of a current of water or air.

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR)

An agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services whose purpose is to prevent exposure and adverse human health effects and diminished quality of life associated with exposure to hazardous substances from waste sites, unplanned releases, and other sources of pollution present in the environment.

Aquifer

An underground geological formation, or group of formations, containing water; sources of groundwater for wells and springs.

Benthic

Relating to or occurring at the bottom of a body of water.

Bioaccumulation

The storage and buildup of chemicals in wildlife and plants. This process can take place in one of two ways: through direct consumption of chemicals, or when one organism consumes another that has already consumed these chemicals. The second method contributes to the level of these substances in the organism that is higher on the food chain.

Carcinogen

A substance or agent that may produce or increase the risk of cancer.

Chronic Exposure

Continuous or repeated exposure to a hazardous substance over a long period of time.

Clean Air Act (CAA)

A Federal law that gives EPA authority to set standards for air quality and to control the release of airborne chemicals from industries, power plants, and cars.

Clean Water Act (CWA)

A Federal law that regulates the pollution that will reach surface waters (rivers, lakes, ponds, and streams). The law prohibits a point source from discharging pollutants into the water unless the discharge meets certain permit requirements.

Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA)

A Federal law, enacted in 1980 and nicknamed “Superfund,” that provides the authority through which the Federal government can compel people or companies responsible for creating hazardous waste sites to clean them up. It also created a public trust fund, known as the Superfund, to assist with the cleanup of inactive and abandoned hazardous waste sites or accidentally spilled or illegally dumped hazardous materials.

Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Information System (CERCLIS)

A database that supports EPA headquarters and regional implementation of the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) of 1980 and the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act (SARA) of 1986. It contains information on site inspections, preliminary assessments, remedial information, and emergency and non-emergency clean-up activities for all hazardous substance/waste sites evaluated under the Superfund Program, including Federal facilities. In addition, CERCLIS contains information about all potential Superfund sites, as well as “Proposed” and “Final” sites that have been listed on the National Priorities List (NPL).

Concentration

The amount of a chemical in a given volume of air, water, or other medium. An example is 15 parts of carbon in a million parts of air.

Contaminant

Harmful or hazardous matter introduced into the environment.

Contaminant Level

A measure of how much of a contaminant is present.

Corrective Action

Cleanup of hazardous waste contamination at non-Superfund sites. See also Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA).

Dense Non-Aqueous Phase Liquid (DNAPL)

Liquid contaminants that are relatively insoluble and heavier than water; also known as sinkers because they will sink to the bottom of an aquifer, where they become especially difficult to detect and clean up.

Ecosystem

A specialized community, including all the component organisms, that forms an interacting system; for example, a marsh, a shoreline, a forest.

Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act (EPCRA)

A Federal law, also known as SARA Title III, that was enacted in November 1986. This law provides an infrastructure at the state and local levels to plan for chemical emergencies. Facilities that store, use, or release certain chemicals may be subject to various reporting requirements. Reported information is then made publicly available so that interested parties may become informed about potentially dangerous chemicals in their community.

Emergency Response

A response action to situations that may cause immediate and serious harm to people or the environment.

Engineering Evaluation/Cost Analysis (EE/CA)

A study conducted as part of a non-time critical short-term cleanup. The EE/CA identifies the objectives of the cleanup and analyzes various cleanup alternatives in terms of cost, effectiveness, and ease of implementation. The EE/CA is made available for public review and comment, prior to the publication of an action memorandum, which outlines the selected cleanup method.

Epidemiology

Study of causes of disease or toxic effects in human populations.

Exposure

Coming into contact with a substance through inhalation, ingestion, or direct contact with the skin; may be acute or chronic.

Explanation of Significant Differences (ESD)

A document which outlines significant changes to a remedy selected in a Record of Decision (ROD) with respect to scope, performance, or cost.

Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA)

A federal law that requires labels on pesticides that provide clear directions for safe use; FIFRA also authorizes EPA to set standards to control how pesticides are used.

Five-year Review

A periodic review of site conditions, data, land use, etc. to ensure that cleanup actions remain protective of human health and the environment.

Food Chain

The sequence of transfers of energy in the form of food from one organism to another when one organism eats or decomposes another organism.

Groundwater

Water found beneath the earth's surface that fills pores between materials, such as sand, soil, or gravel.

Hazard Ranking System (HRS)

The method EPA uses to assess and score the hazards posed by a site that takes into account the nature and extent of contamination and the potential for the hazardous substances to migrate from the site through air, soil, surface water, or groundwater; HRS scores are used to determine whether a site should be placed on the National Priorities List (NPL).

Hazardous Substance

A broad term that includes all substances that can be harmful to people or the environment.

Hazardous Waste

By-products or waste materials of manufacturing and other processes that have some dangerous property; generally categorized as corrosive, ignitable, toxic, or reactive, or in some way harmful to people or the environment.

Health Risk Assessment

Scientific evaluation of the probability of harm resulting from exposure to hazardous materials.

Heavy Metals

Metals such as lead, chromium, copper, and cobalt that can be toxic at relatively low concentrations.

Information Repository

A set of information, technical reports, and reference documents regarding a Superfund site; it usually is located in a public building that is convenient for local residents, such as a public school, city hall, or public library.

Innovative Treatment Technologies

New and creative methods used to effectively treat hazardous waste.

Inorganic Compounds

Molecules that consist of chemical combinations of two or more elements that are not carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, or nitrogen.

Liability

Under Superfund, a party responsible for the presence of hazardous waste at a site is also legally responsible for acting and paying to reduce or eliminate the risks posed by the site.

Light Non-Aqueous Phase Liquid (LNAPL)

Liquid contaminants that are relatively insoluble and lighter than water; also known as floaters because they will float on top of an aquifer.

Long-term Cleanup

A response action that eliminates or reduces a release or threatened release of hazardous substances that is a serious but not an immediate danger to people or the environment. This action, also known as a Remedial Action (RA), may take years to complete.

Migration

The movement of a contaminant from one place to another.

Migration Pathways

The routes a contaminant may move around in the environment (e.g., soil, groundwater, surface water, air).

Monitoring Well

A well drilled at a hazardous waste management facility or Superfund site to collect groundwater samples for analysis to determine the amounts, types, and distribution of contaminants in the groundwater beneath the site.

Municipal Solid Waste

Garbage that is disposed of in a sanitary or municipal solid waste landfill.

Mutagenic

Causing alteration in the DNA (genes or chromosomes) of an organism.

National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) Superfund Basic Research Program

Provides funding to 18 programs at 70 universities and institutions around the United States to study the human health effects of hazardous substances in the environment, especially those found at uncontrolled, leaking, waste disposal sites.

National Oil and Hazardous Substances Pollution Contingency Plan (NCP)

The federal government's blueprint for responding to both oil spills and hazardous substance releases. The NCP is the result of efforts to develop a national response capability and promote overall coordination among the hierarchy of responders and contingency plans.

National Priorities List (NPL)

EPA's list of the most serious uncontrolled or abandoned hazardous waste sites, identified as candidates for long-term cleanup using money from the Superfund trust fund.

Non-time Critical Removal Actions

A type of short-term cleanup in which, based on an evaluation of the site, EPA determines that more than six months is available before on-site activities must begin. A non-time-critical action includes a more extensive study of the contamination and cleanup options, called an Engineering Evaluation/Cost Analysis (EE/CA), and more formal public participation prior to the publishing of an action memorandum authorizing and outlining the cleanup plan.

Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA)

A Federal law that sets minimum health and safety standards for the workplace. Private employers must protect their employees by following OSHA requirements.

Office of Site Remediation and Restoration (OSRR)

The EPA New England office that oversees the following programs: Superfund, Brownfields, Oil Spill, RCRA Corrective Action, and Underground Storage Tanks.

Oil Pollution Act (OPA)

A Federal law that was signed into law in August 1990, largely in response to rising public concern following the Exxon Valdez incident. The OPA improved the nation's ability to prevent and respond to oil spills by establishing provisions that expand the federal government's authority, and providing the money and resources necessary, to respond to oil spills. The OPA also created the national Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund, which is available to provide up to one billion dollars per spill incident.

Operable Unit (OU)

The cleanup of a site can be divided into a number of operable units, depending on the complexity of the problems associated with a site. Operable units may address geographical portions of a site, specific site problems, or initial phases of an action, or may consist of any set of actions performed over time or any actions that are concurrent but located in different parts of a site.

Operation and Maintenance (O&M)

Activities that protect the integrity of the selected remedy for a site. O&M measures are initiated by a state after the remedy has achieved the Remedial Action (RA) objectives and remediation goals outlined in the Record of Decision (ROD), and is determined to be operational and functional (O&F) based on state and federal agreement.

Organic Compounds

Molecules that typically contain carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, or nitrogen.

Percolation

The movement of water downward and radially through subsurface soil layers, usually continuing downward toward groundwater.

Permeability

The degree to which groundwater can move freely through an aquifer.

Pesticide

Any chemical used to kill or control undesired insects, weeds, rodents, fungi, bacteria, or other organisms. Some pesticides are known to cause cancer.

Plume

A body of contaminated groundwater flowing from a specific source. The movement of the groundwater is influenced by such factors as local groundwater flow patterns, the character of the aquifer in which groundwater is contained, and the density of contaminants.

Point Source

A stationary location or fixed facility from which pollutants are discharged; any single identifiable source of pollution; e.g., a pipe, ditch, ship, ore pit, factory smokestack.

Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs)

A group of toxic chemicals used for a variety of purposes including electrical applications. PCBs are known to cause cancer in animals. PCB use and sale was banned in 1979 with the passage of the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA).

Potentially Responsible Parties (PRPs)

Any individual or company who may have contributed to contamination at a Superfund site. Under CERCLA, PRPs are expected to conduct or pay for site cleanup.

Preliminary Assessment (PA)

The process of collecting and reviewing available information about a known or suspected hazardous waste site or release that is used to determine if the site requires further study.

Proposed Plan

A Superfund site cleanup strategy prepared by EPA that is subject to public comments.

Reactive

One of four categories of hazardous waste; substances capable of changing into something else in the presence of other chemicals, usually violently or producing a hazardous by-product.

Recharge Areas

Area in which an aquifer is replenished with water by the downward percolation of precipitation through soil and rock.

Record of Decision (ROD)

A public document that explains which cleanup alternatives will be used to clean up a Superfund site. The ROD for sites listed on the National Priorities List (NPL) is created from information generated during the Remedial Investigation/Feasibility Study (RI/FS).

Release

When a hazardous substance goes from a controlled condition (for example, inside a truck, barrel, storage tank, or landfill) to an uncontrolled condition in the air, water, or land.

Remedial Action (RA)

The phase in Superfund site cleanup following the Remedial Design (RD) phase where the actual construction or implementation occurs. The RA is based on the specifications described in the Record of Decision (ROD).

Remedial Design (RD)

The phase in Superfund site cleanup where the technical specifications for cleanup remedies and technologies are designed. The RD is based on the specifications described in the Record of Decision (ROD).

Remedial Investigation/Feasibility Study (RI/FS)

Performed at the site after a site is listed on the National Priorities List (NPL). The RI serves as the mechanism

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for collecting data. The FS is the mechanism for the development, screening, and detailed evaluation of alternative remedial actions. The RI and FS are conducted concurrently; data collected in the RI influence the development of remedial alternatives in the FS, which in turn affect the data needs and scope of treat ability studies and additional field investigations.

Remedy

The method selected to clean up a Superfund site.

Removal Action

See short-term cleanup.

Residual Contamination

Amount of a pollutant remaining in the environment after a natural or technological process has taken place (e.g., the level of chemical remaining in soil after it has been treated).

Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA)

A Federal law whose primary goals are to protect human health and the environment from the potential hazards of waste disposal, conserve energy and natural resources, reduce the amount of waste generated, and ensure that wastes are managed in an environmentally sound manner. Management of solid waste (e.g., garbage), hazardous waste, and underground storage tanks holding petroleum products or certain chemicals are regulated by RCRA.

Response Action

An action taken by EPA or another Federal, state, or local agency to address the risks posed by the release or threatened release of hazardous substances—generally categorized as emergency response, short-term cleanup, and long-term cleanup.

Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA)

A Federal law that ensures that our tap water is fit to drink. Passed in 1974, SDWA sets national drinking water standards for public systems that deliver water to the tap. SDWA is used with the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) and the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) to protect and clean up groundwater by setting water quality standards.

Sampling

The collection of representative specimens analyzed to characterize site conditions.

Saturated Zone

The area below the water table where all open spaces are filled with water under pressure equal to or greater than that of the atmosphere.

Semi-Volatile Organic Compounds (SVOCs)

A group of chemicals composed primarily of carbon and hydrogen that have a tendency to evaporate (volatilize) into the air from water or soil. Some of the compounds that make up asphalt are examples of SVOCs.

Short-term Cleanup

A cleanup process that addresses immediate threats to public health and the environment that typically consist of less complex or less extensive contamination problems than those which require a long-term cleanup. There are three types of short-term cleanups: emergencies (e.g., fire or explosions), time-critical actions, and non-time-critical actions. Also referred to as removal actions.

Site Assessment

The process by which EPA determines whether a potential site should be placed on the National Priorities List (NPL); it can consist of a Preliminary Assessment (PA) or a combination of a PA and a Site Inspection (SI).

Site Inspection (SI)

A technical phase in Superfund site cleanup following the Preliminary Assessment (PA), during which EPA gathers information (including sampling data) from a site in order to use the Hazard Ranking System (HRS) to determine whether the site should be placed on the National Priorities List (NPL).

Source Reduction

The design, manufacture, or use of products that in some way reduces the amount of waste that must be disposed of; examples include reuse of by-products, reducing consumption, extending the useful life of a product, and minimizing materials going into production.

Spill Prevention, Control and Countermeasures (SPCC)

A plan that outlines how a facility will prevent oil spills, as well as how it plans to control and contain an oil spill to keep it from reaching surface water. Examples include: installing a secondary containment such as a dike, and making sure oil tanks are located within a fenced or locked area.

Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act (SARA)

Amended the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) on October 17, 1986. SARA reflected EPA's experience in administering the complex Superfund program during its first six years and made several important changes and additions to the program.

Superfund Trust Fund

A public trust fund created with passage of CERCLA in 1980 to be used to help pay for the cleanup of abandoned hazardous waste sites.

Surface Water

Bodies of water that form and remain above ground, such as lakes, ponds, rivers, streams, bays, and oceans.

Time-critical Removal Actions

A type of short-term cleanup in which, based on an evaluation of the site, EPA determines that less than six months is available before site activities must be initiated. During time-critical actions, EPA conducts an investigation of the contamination and produces an action memorandum authorizing and outlining the cleanup before beginning the actual cleanup.

Toxic

Poisonous.

Toxic Release Inventory (TRI)

EPA requires annual reports of toxic chemical releases to the environment. These reports are submitted on EPA Form R, the TRI Reporting Form. The reports are required to provide the public with information on the releases of listed toxic chemicals in their communities and to provide EPA with release information to assist the Agency in determining the need for future regulations.

Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA)

A Federal law, passed in 1976, that requires tests of chemicals that may harm human health or the environment; reviews of new chemical substances; limits on the availability of some existing chemicals; and import

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certification standards to ensure that imported chemicals comply with domestic rules. TSCA bars the introduction of chemicals that may pose unreasonable risks to people or the environment, when the risks outweigh possible economic and social benefits.

Toxicology

Study of the effects of poisons in living organisms.

Treatment Technologies

Processes applied to hazardous waste or contaminated materials, to permanently alter their condition through chemical, biological, or physical means, and reduce or eliminate their danger to people and the environment.

Underground Storage Tank (UST)

An underground tank storing hazardous substances or petroleum products. Under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), Congress directed EPA to establish regulatory programs that would prevent, detect, and clean up releases from UST systems containing petroleum or hazardous substances.

Unsaturated Zone

The area above the water table where soil pores are not fully saturated, although some water may be present.

Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs)

A group of chemicals composed primarily of carbon and hydrogen that have a tendency to evaporate (volatilize) into the air from water or soil. VOCs include substances that are contained in common solvents and cleaning fluids. Some VOCs are known to cause cancer.

Water Table

The top of the water-saturated portion of an aquifer.

Well

A bored, drilled, or driven shaft whose purpose is to reach underground water supplies.

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